

PRABHATKUMAR MUKHOPADHYAY

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A. D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay

Gopikanath Roy Chowdhury



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ISBN 81-7201-910-6

First Published 1995

Price : Rs 15

Published by the Sahitya Akademi

Typesetting by Classic Lazer Printers. Calcutta 700 009

Printed at Pelican Press, 85 B. B. Ganguly Street, Calcutta 700 012

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A Biographical Sketch

Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay emerged as a unique luminary on the horizon of post-Rabindranath Bengali short stories. One of his most amazing attainments is that he achieved immense popularity and established himself as a very powerful artist in the realm of story telling, even when Rabindranath's creative power as a story-writer was in its prime.

Prabhatkumar was born on 4 February 1873 at Dhatrigram in the district of Burdwan. He belonged to a middle-class family.

His father Joygopal was a Railway Telegraph Signaller. Prabhatkumar passed his early years in different towns of Bihar, since his father's job was transferable. Thus right from his early boyhood, Prabhatkumar had the opportunity of acquiring varied experience of a wide range of men and women and their environment in Bihar. These experiences made a permanent impact upon an impressionable mind of a budding litterateur. The academic career of Prabhatkumar was not so bright. He passed the Entrance examination in 1888 from Jamshedpur High School with second division marks. Later he joined Patna College and took his B.A. degree in 1895.

Prabhatkumar was never a meritorious student, and in fact, he had never aspired to be so. He was born with the soul of a creative artist and he started writing verses when he was a college boy. A student in the B.A. class, Prabhatkumar was overwhelmed with joy and wonder when he found his verse published for the first time in *Sadhana*, a renowned monthly magazine, edited by Rabindranath Tagore. It was a rare occasion for the young boy, and it helped him much in introducing himself to that eminent poet.

Prabhatkumar married Brajabala Devi, daughter of Annadaprasad Chattopadhyay of Halisahar in December 1892 when he was just a college student. He was really happy in his married life. Her loving wife exercised great influence upon his creative life. She was indeed the source of inspiration for Prabhatkumar for composing a number of romantic lyrics.

Days of the young couple rolled on, as if in a trance of dreamy ecstasy. But as ill luck would have it, their married life was cut short with the sudden death of his beloved wife. The excruciating mental agony following his wife's passing away turned the tide of Prabhatkumar's life. The emotional excess in his poems was somewhat replaced by a serene sense of philosophical quest. The romantic poet in him subsequently changed into a detached and somewhat dispassionate observer of the surrounding life. The poet turned fictionist.

Prabhatkumar's first love was literature. His inner self, right from his early youth, had a perpetual yearning for remaining absorbed in creative activity in the literary world. But life is not all poetry and art, at least, not for a youngman with a poor economic backdrop. And therefore, Prabhatkumar had to face the hardship for earning a livelihood. Just after passing the B.A. examination, Prabhatkumar initially worked as a school teacher at Jamshedpur. Afterwards, he secured a temporary job at an office of the Government of India in Simla and later on was permanently appointed at the office of the Director General of Telegraph at Calcutta.

But Prabhatkumar was not destined to end up his life as a mere office clerk. Very soon, he got a chance which he could have never dared to dream of. It was the rare opportunity of sailing for England.

Prabhatkumar's poems and other writings had been regularly published in the journal *Bharati* since his early youth. *Bharati*, a well-circulated prestigious journal in Bengali, was organised and edited chiefly by the members of the Tagore family.

Prabhatkumar came in close contact with the *Bharati* circle when Rabindranath himself assumed the charge of its editorship in 1898. The young author used to visit the patrika office regularly. After Rabindranath's editorship for only one year, Sarala Devi, his niece took over the charge of editing the journal.

Sarala Devi highly admired Prabhatkumar as a creative writer. In course of time, this admiration turned into love. Finally their romantic love tended to obtain a social sanction in marriage. But the parents of the 'bride' opined that Prabhatkumar would have to be a worthy groom for their highly accomplished daughter. Therefore they decided to send Prabhatkumar to England for obtaining the degree of Barrister-at-law. Accordingly, Prabhatkumar sailed for the foreign land in January 1901 and returned, about three years later, in December 1903 as a Barrister-at-law. But it was quite unfortunate for Prabhatkumar that the proposed marriage ultimately did not take place. The reasons are not as yet clearly known. Some say that since Prabhatkumar's mother strongly opposed this matrimonial proposal, it fizzled out. This came as a great shock to Prabhatkumar who gave up the idea of re-marrying for ever.

After returning from London as a Barrister, Prabhatkumar started practising law at Darjeeling. He also lived at Rungpur (now in Bangladesh) and Gaya (Bihar) for a few years in connection with his practice as a lawyer. But Prabhatkumar could not take his profession seriously because of his passion for literature. He had been cherishing an intense desire since early youth for engaging himself fully to the cause of creative literature. His desire met partial fulfilment while he was living at Rungpur and Gaya. He was then in his early forties. During this period, a number of short stories and novels namely *Shorashi* (a collection of sixteen stories), *Ramasundari* (a novel), *Deshi o bilati* (stories relating to the lives of Indian and foreign people), *Ratnadeep* (Bejewelled lamp—a novel) had earned him wide recognition. The reading public and the literary critics were highly impressed with the variety of subject-matter, new style of presentation and the

lucid lively language of his stories. Overwhelmed with the inspiration provided by the readers and the stirring urge from the innermost heart, Prabhatkumar was keen to devote himself whole-heartedly to creative writing. Very soon he got a chance to fulfil his desire. In 1916 he was offered an assignment of Associate Editorship of the Bengali monthly *Manasi O Marmabani*, founded by his excellency Jagadindranath Ray of Natore. After a few months, he was appointed a lecturer in the Law College of Calcutta University. In the wake of these happy turns of events, Prabhatkumar started living permanently in Calcutta and gradually found himself more and more acclaimed, as years rolled on, both as a writer and an editor.

For fourteen years Prabhatkumar was associated with the editorial responsibility of *Manasi o marmabani*, one of the front-ranking literary journals of Bengal like *Bangadarshan*, *Prabasi* and *Sabujpatra*. Around that journal developed a group of writers who frequently assembled in Prabhatkumar's residence in North Calcutta. The guests who gathered there, were impressed by the serene and suave personality of Prabhatkumar and his friendly and cordial attitude towards fellow writers. One distinctive feature of that assembly was that all who gathered there had a profound admiration and regard for Rabindranath. Prabhatkumar and his *Manasi o marmabani* were all inextricably linked with the common golden thread of devotion to Tagore.

The achievements of Prabhatkumar as an editor were truly assessed by no less a journalist than Ramananda Chattopadhyay, the renowned editor of *The Modern Review* and *Prabhasi*. According to him, 'The tradition which he (Prabhatkumar) established as an editor may be compared to that of his great predecessors – Iswarchandra Gupta, editor of *Sambad Prabhakar*, Bankimchandra, editor of *Bangadarshan* and Rabindranath, editor of *Sadhana*, etc.'

Prabhatkumar was readily accepted by the Bengali readers as a remarkable short story writer. A story writer par excellence,

Prabhatkumar was ranked second to none, in his life-time, other than only Rabindranath. He still holds a very high place in the literary history of Bengal, though it should be put on record, in this connection, that in the later phase of his life, Prabhatkumar started gradually losing his wide-ranging popularity. It was chiefly due to the appearance of Saratchandra on the literary scene of Bengal, who evinced a superb skill of a far deeper and more penetrating probe into the unexplored recesses of human mind.

Prabhatkumar passed away in Calcutta on April 5, 1932.

Poems and Essays

POEMS

Prabhatkumar's pre-eminence as a short story writer has been widely recognised by the reading public of Bengal. He is still revered as one of the front-ranking story-tellers in Bengali literature. But another facet of his creative proclivity is hardly remembered today. Few of his devoted readers are even aware of the fact that Prabhatkumar made his debut on the literary scene of Bengal as a poet, and not as a fiction writer. His first poem, 'Chiranava' (The ever-new) was published in 1890 in the journal *Bharati o balak*, where his first story 'Dwiteeya Vidyasagar' (The second Vidyasagar) was not published before 1895. Prabhatkumar had an innate inclination towards poems. Poetry was his first love. The creative genius of Rabindranath, the poet, had already exerted a powerful impact on Bengali literature. Tagore gave almost an entirely new direction to the young aspirants in the field of poetry and they followed his lead. Prabhatkumar was also one among them. He was an earnest devotee of Rabindranath. This profoundly respectful admiration of Prabhatkumar for the great poet expressed itself in an effusive manner in his critical essay, 'Chitra-kavyer samalochana' (A criticism on the collection of poems entitled *Chitra*), published in the journal *Dasi* in 1896. Despite the critic's emotional excess, this piece of writing clearly exhibited his genuine love and appreciative faculty regarding lyric poetry.

But as a poet, Prabhatkumar did not possess the talent to imbibe the unfathomable depth of feelings and highly imaginative quality reflected in Tagore's lyrics. Prabhatkumar with his limited resources, wrote about forty lyrics and a few anecdotal poems.

Besides, he translated some English poems into Bengali. It may be noted here that his poems were published only in periodicals. Unfortunately these had not been brought before the readers in book-form.

His lyrics may be classified into the following categories : a) on Nature, b) on Love, c) on Abstract ideas and d) Miscellaneous. Among Prabhatkumar's lyrics on nature, 'Chiranava' (The ever-new) and 'Prahelika' (The enigma), etc, are notable. It was the golden era of Rabindranath's nature-poetry. Prabhatkumar sought to imbibe inspiration from Tagore's *Sonar tari* and *Chitra*. But the expanse and depth of Tagore's imagination and perception relating to nature were beyond the reach of Prabhatkumar. He could only grasp its objective and pictorial beauty. He could not identify himself with the living spirit of nature. Still, his simple delineation bereft of any ornamentation somehow attracted the attention of the readers.

Prabhatkumar's poems on love are characterised not by intense physical desires, but quiet domestic feelings and emotions. His faith in the traditional values and ideas of conjugal love has been reflected in his poems, namely, 'Kamana' (The desire), 'Ananta shayya' (the eternal bed), 'Janmantarey' (In the life beyond death) etc.

These poems of Prabhatkumar are not anything unconventional. The poet merely inherited the legacy of his predecessors who had composed poems on domestic and conjugal love.

There were a number of contemporaneous Bengali poets who wrote poems on abstract ideas. Iswarchandra Gupta, an early nineteenth century poet, was the pioneer in this enterprise. Prabhatkumar followed his footprints. He was inquisitive about the enigma of this transitory life on earth. His poems revealed the poet's quest for the meaning of life and death and the ultimate truth. The poems entitled 'Mayabad' (The doctrine of Maya), 'Paralok-tattwa' (the concept of the world beyond death)

deserve mention. Here are a few lines from 'Mayabad' :

Alack ! if this life
Be merely a stage
What else ? now we should
Open our eyes,
Let the curtain be rung down.

Most of those poems failed to move the innermost feelings of the readers, since the poet was incapable of blending genuine lyrical flavour with his idea-oriented thought process.

Prabhatkumar's miscellaneous poems included a few on patriotism and poetry. But these compositions seemed to be mere futile exercise due to lack of requisite imaginative quality and depth of feelings.

The young poet also translated a few English short poems into Bengali. As a translator his success was considerable. His translations were usually literal, but at times he preferred to have a little amount of freedom for more grace and beauty. Among the poems translated by Prabhatkumar, 'Love's calender' (Charles Kent), 'She came and went' (J. R. Lowell), 'The humour of love' (John Sucketing), 'Abu Ben Adhem' (Leigh Hunt), 'Song' (Thomas Moore) and 'Love and hope' (T. Moore) are mentionable. The artistic quality of the Bengali rendering of those poems may be partially inferred from the fact that Rabindranath admired Prabhatkumar for his venture in this area of literary pursuit.

Prabhatkumar wrote only three anecdotal poems : 'Holikahini' (The 'Holi'- episode), 'Namlekha' (The writing of a name) and 'Chhabijanma' (The birth of a picture). 'Abhishap' (The curse), a satiric poem, also contains traces of episodic quality. The poem 'Holikahini' maintains a commendable balance between the art of story-telling and that of characterisation. The story keeps the

reader seized with curiosity till almost the end. That Prabhatkumar had a rare aptitude for story-telling along with the dexterity of creating humour was evident from this anecdotal poem. Rabindranath unerringly noticed this inborn quality of Prabhatkumar and advised him to change from poetry to prose, rather, short story. And it posed no difficulty for Prabhatkumar in shifting to this new genre of creative writing. Therefore, it would not perhaps be erroneous to state that the unknown composer of a few anecdotal poems was the real 'predecessor' of the renowned short story writer. We feel today that herein lies possibly the true relevance of Prabhatkumar, the poet. He started his literary career as a poet, and dreamt of making Poesy his only 'intellectual companion' in life. But he was not destined to enjoy that 'companionship' for a long time. The short dreamy spell was over, following the sudden death of his beloved wife. This shocking disaster entirely reversed the course of literary pursuit of this budding poet. He gradually became inclined towards the world of reality – the world of fiction. Rabindranath's advice and instruction, as we have already stated, were also instrumental in the shaping of his career as a fiction writer.

ESSAYS

Prabhatkumar had achieved distinction and celebrity as a fiction writer. But very few among his readers are aware of his other prose writings which were spread over his whole creative period. These were not the products of any great erudition or intellection ; those writings were not at all dissertations or formal essays. Rather they were more or less informal both in spirit and style. Prabhatkumar wrote those informal essays in his usual facile and lucid manner which easily drew the readers very close to him. If we assess those writings from the standpoint of intellectual or artistic quality, they do not deserve any considerable distinction. Nevertheless, those writings have certainly a relevant role in obtaining a comprehensive perception

of his total personality.

The prose writings of Prabhatkumar may be classified into three main categories : 1) Literary appreciations 2) Memoirs and 3) Travel-reminiscences.

His first literary appreciation, 'Chitrar-kavyer samalochana' (A criticism on *Chitra*, a collection of poems by Rabinndranath Tagore), was published in 1896. It was not a 'literary criticism' in the true sense of the term. It was just an eulogical appreciation. Prabhatkumar, as it has been told before, was a staunch admirer of Rabindranath. The critical study under consideration shows that he was full of overflowing admiration for the collection of poems, namely, *Chitra*. He had not the power of imagination and sensitivity for delving deep into the superbly aesthetic qualities of this collection. His appraisal was somewhat superficial and effusive. Despite all those drawbacks, this appreciation foreshadowed the image of the future creative artist in prose. Such intimate and facile style of expression and the easy appreciative outlook about life and literature, as were found here, were also the distinctive features of his fictions.

Besides this, Prabhatkumar wrote some other critical essays on a few poetical works by different poets, such as, *Madhabika* (by Balendranath Tagore), *Chitrabikash* (by Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay) etc. These were also not so remarkable as pieces of literary criticism. They were also marked by superficiality and lack of any profound appreciative power.

In an investigative article, entitled, 'Sanskrita Vidyasunder' (Vidyasundar in Sanskrit), Prabhatkumar made a diversion as a literary critic. In this article, he sought to trace the real source of 'Vidyasundar', a famous Bengali poetical narrative of Bharatchandra, of the eighteenth century. This essay evinced Prabhatkumar's inquisitive mind as a researcher. But the characteristic aspect of his literary essays was that they were never burdened with facts, information and literary theories. His intimate and spontaneous love for literature, unfettered by

excessive intellection has expressed itself in these writings.

In a few memoirs Prabhatkumar paid his respectful tribute to several literary personalities of Bengal, including Rameshchandra Dutta and Taraknath Gangopadhyay, two renowned Bengali novelists. Those writings were not any ambitious attempt for evaluating the works of the above-noted authors. They contained fragments of some past incidents, which built up, to some extent, the personal images of the deceased litterateurs. The memoirs, presented in a very lucid manner, remind us of Prabhatkumar's captivating style of story-telling.

We learn from his biography that Prabhatkumar visited foreign countries, especially England when he was quite young. The travel-reminiscences, published in different periodicals, constituted an account of his exotic experiences in those places.

Among ten reminiscences, 'Stratford on Avone ekbela' (A few hours at Stratford-on-Avon), 'Abbotsford', 'Bilati theatre' (British theatre), 'Ingraj ramani' (The British woman) deserve special mention.

The initial two travelogues bear the names of towns associated with Shakespeare and Scott. Prabhatkumar was overwhelmed when he was climbing those stairs of abbotsford-House which had been glorified by the touch of that great novelist, Walter Scott 'for a thousand times'.

The essay entitled 'Ingraj ramani' (The British woman) reflected the author's power of observation by which he had offered an impressive description of the physical beauty and personality of the British woman.

Prabhatkumar wrote a few short stories which were based on his experiences in Europe. The realistic appeal of those stories becomes more evident when a reader goes through the travel-reminiscences along with those stories. Herein lies the proper value of those writings.

Prabhatkumar was born with an instinctive predilection for writing tales of joys and sorrows, ambitions and frustrations of human life. He was not meant for becoming an erudite scholar or writing scholarly dissertations. The above-mentioned personal essays bear testimony to this assertion. These writings reveal the personality of a man who was essentially an artist gifted with the power of detached but sensitive observation about his surroundings.

Short Stories

As an author, Prabhatkumar belonged to the twentieth century, but he was born in the penultimate quarter of the nineteenth century. His personality was chiefly moulded by the social milieu of the preceding century. He inherited the legacy of his ancestors regarding social and moral sense of values. A sense of conservatism and deep esteem for the customs and conventions of the bygone days, and a sense of profound faith in the sanctity of married life and in the values of old joint family system were prevalent in his stories and novels. All those cherished values and norms of the nineteenth century life were portrayed by Prabhatkumar in his novels and stories of the twentieth century.

In fact, though Prabhatkumar was a twentieth century-man for a long portion of his lifetime, his mind was tinged with the afterglow of the last century. It might seem strange, but it was true that Prabhatkumar, a great devotee of Rabindranath was not at all influenced by his progressive and liberal views. It may be further noted that though the impact of the first world war was considerable on contemporary Bengali fiction, it left, for all practical purposes, no influence on the creative personality of Prabhatkumar.

While in the post-world war (first) period a strong sense of revolt against established social values and a sense of exclusiveness of the individual expressed itself in the writings of the young authors, especially those who were associated with the Kollol group, their contemporaneous author Prabhatkumar evinced clearly the trends of Bankimchandra, the priest of traditional idealistic values of life of the nineteenth century.

And the wide range of popularity of Prabhatkumar among

the reading public owed much to all those circumstances, to his proneness towards traditionalism. It should be remembered in this context that a considerable section of the people of Bengal in the early part of the current century was still under the spell of the old conventional values of life. They adored those values and admired his writings in which the values were portrayed faithfully.

But it would be an injustice to ignore other facets of his literary personality. He was never a hardcore conservative, and he won over the hearts of thousands of his readers not merely for his attachment to traditional ways and values of life, but for some other major reasons as well. One of them was his genuine love for humanity, his deep empathy with the natural instincts and emotions of the common man. This warmth of cordial feeling permeated his writings. It is true that he could not deny the authority and powers of society, but it is certainly no less true that the dignity of the individual, men and women, found a lively expression in his stories and novels.

His heart, indeed, was full to the brim with love for the common people, with whom he had the opportunity to come in close contact. He had spent several years, in the earlier part of his life, in different places of Bihar, Uttarpradesh and Bengal, namely Gaya, Jamalpur, Patna, Simla, Gazipur, Rungpur etc. Besides all those places within the country, he had gone abroad where he mixed with variegated shades of life of the outlandish people also.

During his sojourn in various regions of India as stated above, he came to know different types of people from diverse corners of our society such as wealthy feudal lords and their subordinates, young distressed clerks, ill-paid employees of small railway stations, petty lawyers of mofussal courts, poor college students living in old dilapidated boarding houses etc.

Prabhatkumar's understanding of those people was not possibly very profound. He could hardly penetrate into the innermost recesses of human personality as Rabindranath could.

He was not so capable of analysing meticulously the mysteries of the minds of men and women with the acumen of Saratchandra Chatterjee. But still, Prabhatkumar's attitude towards his surrounding life and people was not at all to be ignored. He had developed an exclusive frame of mind which was not only full of love and sympathy for the common people, but also vibrant with fun and humour. He had always tried to brighten up the dark and dismal aspects of life with the illuminating rays of fun and joviality. Behind all these varied facades, there was the soul of a detached artist to whom life itself was a priceless treasure.

The key-word of his attitude towards life was that of an onlooker with easy-going and healthy frame of broad mind who liked to enjoy the pains and pleasures in a dispassionate mood. The contemporary post-war backdrop of disillusionment and misgivings could not darken the bright horizon of the mind of this optimist writer. He never denied that there were hosts of ills and woes in life, but never did he feel that those were beyond remedy. And this kind of ripe optimism in his fictional writings might have been instrumental in bringing him wide popularity.

Despite various knotty complications in the very texture of life, Prabhatkumar has often aimed at portraying happy end of his stories. This is quite evident in his domestic tales, and the stories woven around the problems of conjugal life. In these stories, where all the problems have been finally resolved through understanding and compromise, Prabhatkumar seems to adopt a sort of conservative attitude towards life. That means, even in the midst of intense misunderstanding between a husband and a wife, the wife's sincere devotion for her husband and a sense of unflinching faith ingrained in her mind about conjugal idealism, help in restoring the shattered relations between them.

Among those stories, 'Nutan bou' (The new bride) is a typical example. Nirmala did not know that her husband had already been married. But when she came to know this painful fact, she

had no feeling of anguish or discontent towards her husband. In another story 'B. A. pass kayedi' (A graduate convict), we find that Mokshada was so much devoted to her husband that she accepted the undignified job of a maidservant in the jailor's household only to get occasional glimpses of his husband who had been imprisoned for political activities.

Among other stories concerning this trend in Prabhatkumar, 'Bhulbhanga' (Realising error) and 'Sribilasher durbuddhi' (Foolishness of Sribilash) deserve special mention. In 'Bhulbhanga' Haripriya had left her husband's house and decided to lead a rigorously religious life. But ultimately her guru appeared before her as a lustful lascivious demon, and then only she realised her error. She finally returned to her husband, after realising that the real fulfilment of a woman's life is in leading an ideal domestic life and worshipping her husband. Similarly in 'Sribilasher durbuddhi', the arrogant and obstinate wife who came from a rich family, bowed down before her husband, when she realised and rectified her mistake.

In the above-mentioned stories, it seems that Prabhatkumar intends to cling to the age old established values of social life. But we find, on the contrary, the author severely satirises the bigotry and superstition related to religion.

'Devi', one of the best stories of Prabhatkumar, deals with this attitude. Here the writer intends to depict the heart-rending tragedy which occurs due to intense religious superstition. The background of the story is rural, and it dates back to the mid-eighteenth century. Kalikinkar, a feudal lord and devout devotee of the goddess Kali, suddenly announced one morning that her daughter-in-law Dayamoyee was none but the goddess herself. After this announcement, people from distant places came to worship Dayamoyee as a goddess. But Dayamoyee could not reconcile herself to being worshipped as a goddess. She talked to her husband and planned to leave the house surreptitiously with him. But on the night, when they were about to start, Dayamoyee asked her husband to go back, because she had come to believe

firmly by this time that she was really a goddess and not a human being. But she had to undergo the most severe test of her superhuman powers very soon, when the only scion of Kalinkar's family, a very young boy, fell seriously ill. Dayamoyee declared with strong faith in her divine powers that no medical treatment was needed and it was she herself who would surely cure the ailing child through supernatural means. But all her attempts and assurances were in vain. The little boy died. Then only Dayamoyee realised that she was not at all a goddess – she was just an ordinary human being – and she finally committed suicide. Thus in this remarkable story (the story-element of 'Devi' was gifted to him by Rabindranath Tagore), the author portrays with commendable detachment the tragic wastage of human life at the altar of blind religious superstition.

In another story 'Kurhano meye' (The foundling), the author's modernist and truly human outlook is portrayed. Here he delineates the cruel aspect of the dowry system and the heavy burden of the marriage of one's daughter. Sitanath, an old miserly man with inhuman greed for money, wants to grab the ornaments of the daughter-in-law who died at her father's residence. The author begins the story with the following impressive description of the arrival of the old man at the village, where the father of his deceased daughter-in-law lives, along with a suggestive indication of the avaricious and miserly nature of the old man :

It is afternoon. The swollen Ganges of the month of Sraban is lapping the roots of the banian tree on the ghat of Matiganj. A decaying boat was being moored at the ghat. Out of it stepped cautiously an aged lean-bodied Brahman. The boatman handed to him his bag, his umbrella and stick. Taking them in one hand, he extended the other to give a small silver coin, a quarter-rupee, as payment to the rowers. Taking the coin, the boatman said, 'Master, there are five of us, how will four annas suffice ?'

'Do you mean to say that a four anna coin is too little ?'

'*Huzoor*, the whole will go in buying four *seers* of rice. Then there is the cooking pot, the wood and the salt to buy.'

'Is it ! Take two more annas,' said the Brahman. Carefully counting eight pice several times, he gave them to the boatman. The boatman was not satisfied. He said, 'Sir, five pice each after a hard day's labour, is not enough. Make it the full eight annas.'

After some further haggling the old man threw down four more pice.

Then Sitanath, the old man, made his way to his destination and finally collected the ornaments after breaking open the iron-safe. When Sitanath was coming back with the jewel-box, it was lost as his boat suddenly capsized in the river. Some Bhudhar Chattopadhyay somehow saved Sitanath's life. Bhudhar had a marriageable daughter. He requested Sitanath to agree to arrange for a wedlock between Sitanath's widower son and Bhudhar's daughter. He assured Sitanath that then only he (Sitanath) would get back his lost ornaments. But when his widower son did not agree to marry again, it was Sitanath, the old greedy fellow himself agreed to marry. At last, with a view to preventing his old father from marrying, and helping poor Bhudharbabu, Annadacharan, the son of that old greedy man, collected two thousand rupees. But all problems were solved when the widower son ultimately married that girl as he came to know that she was none but the sister of his deceased wife. And to his utter discomfiture, the old greedy Sitanath failed to get back those ornaments since those had been really drowned in the river, when the boat had capsized. The story ends with a happy note – a sort of wish fulfilment. As the story proceeded, it seemed that a tragic end might have followed. But the author intentionally avoided it. Prabhatkumar was no extremist. He believed in compromise. This compromising attitude stemmed from a strong sense of optimism regarding human life. Prabhatkumar's literary personality possessed two

opposite facets : conservatism and modernity. He was, in fact, a conservative modernist. On one hand, he wanted to maintain the traditional values, and on the other, satirised and protested, though mildly, against the inhuman aspects of social tyranny.

Prabhatkumar's was essentially a magnanimous personality. With the liberalism of a broad-minded artist he sought to express the ingrained grace and glory of the human soul. This attitude towards humanity has been reflected in variegated types of stories, such as, 'Kashibashini' (The lady from Benares), 'Phuler mulya' (The cost of flowers), 'Matrihin' (The motherless child) and 'Adarini' (The beloved).

The plot of 'Kashibasini' veers round a fallen woman's deep affection for her daughter, whom she had left behind in her prime youth about fourteen years ago. The woman had come from Benares to her daughter's house, where she lived with her husband. The author maintains a sustained dramatic suspense in the story in which the mother knew her child, but the daughter, Maloti could not recognise her mother, whom she believed to have died long ago.

The following excerpts from the author's own translation of this story (published in *The Modern Review*, April 1910) will show the impressive style of Prabhatkumar's story-telling along with his attractive method of initially intensifying and subsequently unfolding the mysteries of human life and character:

Babu Girindranath, the Head Goods clerk of Dinapur Railway Station, lived in a small thatched cottage away in the bazaar. ... Mrs Girindra was not quite a child as Hindoo brides generally are. Her name was Maloti.

... It was a winter afternoon – past three o'clock. The sun had declined towards the western horizon. Maloti, coming out of her room, stood in the verandah. ... Maloti ... saw ... a station-porter loaded with baggage. ... An elderly Bengalee lady with widow's weeds on, stood by his side. ...

A second later, the stranger stood in the verandah, calmly looking at Maloti. The girl thought she must be a relation of her husband's – but then no one was expected. She remained in a state of perplexity and could not decide whether to *pronam* her or not.

'Is this Girindra Babu's house ?' the new-comer said.

'Yes', replied Maloti.

'Are you his wife ?'

By a shake of her head Maloti indicated that it was so. Then she mustered courage to speak, 'Where are you coming from, Madam ?'

'I am coming from Benares', the widow sweetly replied, 'I was going down home, but unfortunately, while in the train, I lost my ticket. They stopped me here because I must buy another. They told me that the next train was not due till midnight. Being alone in a strange place, I thought I had much better find out some Bengalee family and beg them to let me pass the time in their house. Would you mind ?'

'Oh, not at all ! You are welcome, Madam. Pray be seated.'
... The two ladies sat on the durry, talking.

'What is your name, dear ?'

'Maloti'.

'Where is your parental home ?'

'Uttarparah.'

'Are both your parents alive ?'

Maloti, in a tone of embarrassment, replied, 'My father died soon after I was born. My mother also died when I was quite a young thing.'

A little while later, when the lamps were just lighted, Maloti's husband returned home and learnt from her wife about the arrival

of the Bengalee lady from Benares. But Girindra was suspicious about that unknown lady and refused to allow her stay any longer in her house. He decided that she should leave his house within a short time and go wherever she liked by the next train at midnight. Maloti felt that it was very much awkward for her. The lady had not said anything about leaving that very night. She could not turn her out. But Girindra was firm about his decision.

The entire scenario changed a few minutes later. When Girindra drank a few tumblers of wine, his hostile mood was transformed into a favourable one regarding that lady. Girindra very earnestly requested the lady to spend the night in his house. Later, Maloti came to know that Girindra would be transferred to Tarighat station within three to four days. The lady was scheduled to leave Maloti's house next day afternoon. When she was packing up her things and made ready to go, she said, 'I have been with you only one day and yet I feel it is hard to part.'

Maloti also entertained a similar feeling. She had obtained the companionship of a lady friend in her solitude and it was very soothing to her. ... Maloti said to her friend, 'Suppose you did not go today but stayed on a few days more. Couldn't you do that ? I feel so lonely at times all by myself'.

At Maloti's request, the lady postponed the departure. She stayed there for a few more days, till Girindra left for Tarighat. During that short spell, the relation between Maloti and the lady became intimate. On their way to Tarighat, Girindra and Maloti were accompanied by the Benares-lady. Maloti persuaded her to go with them to Tarighat but it was of no avail. Maloti had to bid good bye to the lady at Dildernagar junction.

The young couple reached Tarighat and put up in the quarters provided by the Railway. ... Maloti, intending to have her bath, opened a trunk to take out a 'Sasree'. It was this trunk which ordinarily contained her jewel case. What was her amazement to find that the jewel case was not there ! ... Maloti ... ransacked every box over and over again – examining every fold of the

clothes even but with no better result.

It was sometime before her husband came home. ... She then related the disaster to him in words constantly broken with sobs. ... 'It is quite clear to me now', said Girindra after a moment's pause, 'The Benares woman must have stolen it'. ... Maloti lifted her eyes and protested.

'I can't believe she has done it. I shouldn't be surprised if I left it behind at the Dinapur house myself'—said she with firmness.

But Girindra would not listen to it. Girindra walked off to send a telegram to the police.

A fortnight passed. ... Nothing has been heard from the police since. It was half past seven. Girindranath was away in his office. Maloti was setting over her midday meal when the train from Dildernagar arrived. ... Quite an unexpected sight met her gaze. The Benares lady came out of the train. ... With a trembling heart she awaited the arrival of the lady. Such a train of thoughts passed through her mind within that short interval ! ... All along Maloti believed her to be innocent—now she became certain of it : were it otherwise would she have come again of her own accord ?

A minute or two later, the lady stood before Maloti ... Maloti could not fail to notice that her visitor's countenance betrayed a sadness and that there was something weighing heavily on her mind. She made bold to ask her the reason for it.

'You suspect that I took away your jewel-case. You have sent the police after me... .' Maloti was silent for some moments, overcome with a feeling of shame. ...

The concluding portion of the story evinces the author's admirable skill of unfolding the hidden mystery behind the relationship between Maloti and the lady. This part of the story

is the product of a brilliant blend of dramatic suspense and deep human emotions.

The story runs thus :

Clouds began to gather in the sky. The sunlight faded away. Looking outside the Benares lady softly said, 'I hope it is not going to rain.'

'What does it matter ?' said Maloti.

'I must be off today.'

'What ! Today ?'

The lips of the lady betrayed a momentary smile. 'You are a silly girl,' she said. 'Your husband suspects me to be a robber and you desire that I should be your guest ? I must return by the two-thirty train today. Many of our nunnery are going on a pilgrimage to Puri. We all start tomorrow.'

'Would you be away long ?'

'Why do you ask ? Would we meet again when we return?', said the lady, her eyes dimmed with tears.

After a short pause she said, 'Maloti, my child, would you like to please me ?'

'Yes, if I could', replied Maloti eagerly.

'I have got a few articles of jewellery here. Wear them for my sake', she said, as she unlocked her box and pulled out a jewel-case of exquisite workmanship. She then pressed a spring and the lid flew open.

Maloti was amazed to see its contents. Gold and silver, set with rubies, diamonds, and other precious stones almost blinded her vision with their dazzle.

'I present those to you', said the Benares lady affectionately.

Maloti was tongue-tied for a few seconds. Then she found

words to say, 'You will excuse me. I can't accept these.'

'Why not?', said her friend complainingly.

'Why should I take these from you? They are worth a small fortune.'

'Well, they are my gift to you.'

'Maybe but what right have I to take them? I mustn't indeed.'

Clouds deepened in the sky. There were signs of a coming storm. Daylight was all but gone.

In slow, deliberate accounts, the Benares lady said, 'Suppose you have such a right'.

'I have such a right? What do you mean?' said Maloti, in utter astonishment.

Looking on the floor with tearful eyes, the Benares lady said, almost in whispers, 'I will tell you. That why I have come today.'

Maloti's bosom throbbed with an uncertain terror. She glanced at the lady in breathless silence.

'Is your mother really dead?'

'That's what people say', said Maloti, her tones clearly betraying her painful diffidence.

'Then you know I am your wretched mother.' Tears freely flowed down the lady's cheeks as she uttered these words.

A thrill of horror passed through Maloti's frame. Involuntarily she moved away a little from her mother.

An incident that had occurred a few months ago, came back to Maloti's mind. She was at her paternal home then, before her husband took her to Dinapur. Mokshada, whom she called her grandmother, had just returned after a long pilgrimage. She was sharing a bed with an aunt of hers and

this old lady. Thinking that Maloti was fast asleep, the two elderly ladies began a secret conversation. But Malati was really awake and could catch every syllable that passed between them. What she heard gave her a cruel shock of surprise. She then learnt for the first time that her mother whom she believed to be in heaven, was really alive and that the grandmother had accidentally come across her in some place of pilgrimage. She learnt that her mother, whose memory she had been cherishing all her life as a most sacred treasure, was, in the eyes of the world, a fallen woman. The agony of mind that Maloti bore in silence that night was indescribable – and this was that mother ! The pain and the humiliation of that night now returned to her with redoubled intensity.

The mother was weeping still. After regaining her self-possession to some extent, she said, 'Does my son-in-law know ?'

'No, he doesn't.'

'When did you hear ?'

'After marriage.'

'Was it from aunt Mokshada ?'

'Yes.'

'It was from her that I heard of your marriage and that your husband was the Goods Clerk at Dinapur. She also told me that you were to come to Dinapur in the month of Aswin.'

Maloti wiped away her tears with a corner of her saree, looked her mother full in the face and said, 'Then in was not by chance that you came to Dinapore ! Why did you ?' Her tone, alas, was stern and unforgiving.

The poor mother relapsed into another fit of sobs. 'Can one forget one's own child ?' she managed to say.

Maloti felt like crying too. It seemed strange to her that

she should have become so tenderly attached to this lady, quite unaware of the relationship between them.

'Why did you reveal yourself?' said Maloti in a tremulous voice.

'I hardly know. I could not restrain myself.'

Maloti was about to say, 'I am glad you did or else I should never have known what it was to look upon one's mother.' But she checked herself immediately. An inner voice seemed to whisper to her, 'Such a mother ! Better not have seen her at all.', So she sat there, sternly silent.

The departure of the train drew near. The station porter, as arranged, came to fetch away the things.

'Please take away these jewels, I wont wear them', said Maloti.

The lady looked at her daughter's face and understood what was passing in her mind. She said, 'It is not as you suppose. You may wear them without the slightest compunction. Had it been otherwise, I would much rather have thrown them into the river than given them to you. For fourteen years I have done penance for the one single folly of my life. These articles of jewellery are not the wages of sin. My father was a very rich man, and he gave me these when I was married.'

'But still I feel I cannot use them, without consulting my husband first.'

'Yes, ask him. Should he however disapprove, you may sell them and make over the proceeds to some Hindoo temple.'

She rose to go.

Maloti in spite of her resolution to the contrary, now fully surrendered herself to the claims of nature. Claspings the feet of the lady with both her arms, she made her obeisance and

in a voice choked with tears, said, 'Mamma, come again.'

'May you be a Savitri, may fortune and happiness ever attend your path', the mother blessed the child and the next moment she was gone.

The author commendably portrays the interaction between the intricate psychological ambivalence of the daughter and the deep affection of the repenting mother. This portrayal is highly laudable because of the author's restrained but powerful exposition, in which he successfully avoids sentimental excess or outburst. It may be noted here that the story was written in 1902, when Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, who had created so many impressive characters of fallen women, had not yet appeared. Till then only Rabindranath had written a story namely 'Vicharak' (The judge), a tragic tale about a fallen woman. But in comparison with that story, appeal of 'Kashibasini' to human heart is probably deeper.

Another remarkable dimension was added to the creative faculty of Prabhatkumar, when he wrote stories about outlandish men and women in the backdrop of foreign countries. Among those stories, 'Phuler mulya' (The cost of flowers) and 'Matrihin' (The motherless child) deserve mention. 'Phuler mulya' reflects a poor unfortunate sister's profound love for his brother. The narrator, Mr. Gupta, a Bengali youth, gets involved with a poor British family consisting of the old ailing mother and a teen-ager daughter, Maggy. The girl had to work very hard to earn livelihood. They were very poor people. Suddenly the ominous news of the death of the girl's elder brother, her only brother, who had been to India as an army officer reached the wretched family. Then Mr. Gupta had to leave England for going back to India. He had to leave the poor bereaved family behind. The girl came to Gupta's house at the time of his departure. She gave him a shilling, a portion of her hard-earned wage and earnestly requested him to buy flowers with that shilling and offer floral tribute to her brother's grave in India.

Mr. Gupta (the narrator) could have easily returned the shilling, because he would be able to collect flowers free of cost, but he could not give it back. Because he did not want to deprive the girl of the sublime and sacred pleasure of sacrifice which she had derived by parting with that hard-earned small coin. Herein lies the author's universal attitude towards the fundamental values of mankind, whichever country they may belong to.

In the story 'Matrihin' (The motherless child), the author depicts the sublimity of love and sacrifice of a British woman, named Miss Campbell, who fell in love with an Indian Hindu youth. The main background of the story is a suburban town near London. The youngman was determined to marry her, even when he came to know that his father was against this wedding only because the girl was a Christian. But Miss Campbell ultimately decided, with an afflicted and heavy heart, not to marry that youngman. She let him leave her for ever and go away with his father. She quietly spent the rest of her long life as a spinster and behaved like a devoted Hindu widow after the news of death of her beloved reached her.

Another magnanimous aspect of this author has been very impressively revealed in his famous story 'Adarini' (The beloved). Here the author portrays with expediency the deeply emotional bond between a man and an animal. The story is woven around the theme of Jayram's affection for Adarini, a female elephant and on the other hand, the animal's spontaneous attachment towards her master. The author concludes the story with a tragic note. In the end, Adarini dies. Jayram's grief at her death is inconsolable. He repents deeply. He feels that Adarini died broken-hearted, only because Jayaram sent her to market for selling her away. Jayram could not bear this excruciating anguish of his repentant soul, which was caused by the miserable death of his beloved mute 'Adarini' and left this world within two months from the death of that hapless animal. The story may somehow remind us of Balzac's 'Passion in the desert', the unique tale of the mysterious intimacy between a man and a tigress,

though Prabhatkumar's exclusiveness is quite evident from his emotional tenderness, which is typical of a Bengalee mind.

Prabhatkumar's humorous stories were highly acclaimed by his readers. This generous and broad-minded author had a profoundly tolerant and complacent attitude towards human follies. He never made any rude or pungent criticism of human frailties, but instead, created hilariously comical tales on the basis of those foibles. There might be a few satirical touches interspersed here and there, but they were so mild that they can barely be detected under their masks of laughter.

Prabhatkumar resorted chiefly to two devices in writing those stories – suitable situations and comical dialogues. In one of the best-known humorous stories of Prabhatkumar, 'Balaban jamata' (The muscular son-in-law), we enjoy laughter stemming out of physical incongruity and skilfully devised comical situations. The very title of this story is expressly indicative of fun. Nalini, the hero of the story, was ridiculed by his sisters-in-law at the time of his marriage for his cream-like soft and effeminate appearance. Nalini being terribly hurt at this ridicule did not visit his father-in-law's house for long two years, though his wife had been staying there.

During this period, Nalini, through strenuous physical exercise, developed his soft cream-like body into a very strong muscular physique. Then one day, Nalini, with an entirely changed appearance started for his father-in-law's house at Allahabad. He put on a turban on his head and held a heavy staff and a gun-box with his hand. After he reached Allahabad, a series of exceedingly comical situations ensued in a natural course of events which culminated in making the whole story a superb comedy of errors. It is needless to say that it all happened mainly because of the change in the hero's entire physique and personality from a cream-like soft son-in-law to a muscular and robust 'He-man'.

Another remarkably amusing story is 'Rasamoyeer rasikata' (Jokes of Rasamoyee). Here the author initially creates a ghostly atmosphere and finally the reader bursts into laughter when he finds that the whole intriguing mystery is nothing but a colossal hoax, a deceptive trick fabricated by his deceased shrewish wife. Rasamoyee, the brawling troublesome wife of Kshetramohan, was the most terrifying element in her husband's life. Kshetramohan felt relieved when his wife died suddenly. But just after Kshetramohan made arrangements for a second marriage, a mysterious incident started happening. Rasamoyee, his dead wife, began sending one letter after another to her husband from 'the world beyond death', threatening her husband with dire consequences if he married again. Kshetramohan was extremely perplexed and unnerved for he could not unfold the horrifying mystery behind it. The puzzled theosophists also started serious deliberations among themselves about this 'spiritual' enigma. Ultimately it was revealed that Rasamoyee, a foresighted woman indeed, had herself written those letters and had made a surreptitious arrangement before her death with her elder sister for sending those intriguing letters one after another to Kshetramohan if he made any attempt for marrying again.

'Pranay parinam' (The consequence of love) is another humorous story based on the feelings of love in an adolescent mind. Maniklal, a teen-ager school-student, suddenly falls in love with eleven-year-old Kusumlata, who had been just a playmate only since his childhood. He had never before experienced any titillating sensation of love about Kusum. But one morning when Manik was sitting on a branch of a guava tree, he saw Kusum coming back home from the near-by bathing ghat. That very moment, Manik's heart inflamed with inexorable love for the girl. The adolescent hero was a voracious reader of romantic love-stories and intensely longed to be a lover himself. The sudden onset of amorous feelings completely turned his head. He started composing verses on sentimental love instead of playing football. All his thoughts and feelings centred around none but only

Kusumlata. At this 'crucial' moment of his life, he found a mentor in his cousin Pravash. Pravash fanned the flame of sentimental desire in Manik's immature mind. Manik grew extremely restive and requested Pravash to inform Manik's father about his son's serious condition. Accordingly, Pravash talked to Manik's father, who had a grave and imposing personality. He sent for his son. When Manik diffidently crept into his father's chamber, he was greeted with violent slaps on his face and terrible twisting of ears. The flame of love was immediately extinguished in Manik's heart. The merciless treatment of his physician-father completely cured Manik's love-malady. The spontaneous flow of humour of the story is caused by a series of well-knit comical situations delineated in a witty manner. The portrayal of the follies and foibles perpetually connected with adolescence reminds us of our past days, adding thereby a new dimension to our sense of aesthetic pleasure.

Another hilariously amusing story is 'Bibaher bijnapan' (The advertisement for marriage). Ram Avtar is a well-to-do married youngman. He perchance finds an attractive advertisement in a dated, torn newspaper. The advertisement informs that the bride is extremely handsome and that the bridegroom will be sent to Europe after the wedding ceremony. Ram Avtar, who was then in an intoxicated condition, did not look at the date of publication of the advertisement. Ram gets emotionally stirred at the very prospect of another marriage. But he could never apprehend any danger underlying this situation. He sent a letter intimating his willingness in this matter. But anyhow the letter reached a group of swindlers in Benares. In reply to Ram's letter they sent a photograph of a charming lady and requested him to come to Benares for getting acquainted with the 'bride'. Delightfully excited with the pleasant dreams of coming events, Ram Avtar, well-dressed with diamond-rings and a gold watch and a gold-chain, started for Benares. In subsequent course of events Ram was robbed of all his ornaments, dress and money. The concluding part of the story appears to be highly amusing when we find Ram

Avtar aimlessly wandering through the streets with only a saffron-coloured loin cloth on his body like an ascetic. This anti-climactic conclusion of Ram Avtar's venture for a colourful courtship and second marriage makes the story a rare specimen of Prabhatkumar's creative faculty as a humorist.

Prabhatkumar wrote a good number of stories based on themes relating to either romantic or conjugal love. In these stories, there is an underlying note of the author's faith in socially accepted age-old values. Here lovers may encounter manifold obstacles for the fulfilment of their desires, but it should be emphatically stated that those desires do not transgress the limits of social morality. But life does not comprise only virtuous people following the dictates of conventional ethics. Life, like the chiaroscuro, reveals both light and darkness. Lovers do not move always on the highways of life; sometimes they prefer serpentine lanes and by-lanes. These types of illicit love or passion may not conform to the maxims of moral laws, but they are not debarred entry into the field of letters, because of the fact that illicit love is very much real in life. In the series of tales of Prabhatkumar, a few stories on illicit love or lust have been included. Among those few, 'Hiralal' is significant.

Hiralal, a poor old man belonging to 'Dom' community, lived in the lonely outskirts of a village. It was a dark night of the rainy season, Hiralal was sitting alone in his room, when a person suddenly came to him. Hiralal could not ascertain whether the person was a man or a woman as his or her face was covered with a veil. Later he recognised her to be the adulterous wife of Binod. Binod lived in Amritsar for doing a job there. During his long absence, his wife had been involved in an illicit relation with a man. But since Binod was returning home, his wife had thought out a nefarious plan of killing her husband by administering poison. The woman had come alone at midnight to Hiralal for procuring some poison from Hiralal, who was known to be in possession of herbal drugs and snake-venom. The woman went back procuring the 'deadly poison'. Next day

Binod came back from Amritsar. When the night advanced, Hiralal went out of his cottage and stealthily entered Binod's house. Binod's wife was startled to see him. Hiralal found Binod sleeping. The old man told the adulterous woman that her wicked plan would fizzle out because he had given her sleeping drug instead of poison. The woman was on the verge of fainting, out of utter frustration. But Hiralal was relentless. She was compelled by stubbornly persistent Hiralal to leave at once her husband's house for ever.

Prabhatkumar's craftsmanship in the portrayal of the woman as abominable sin incarnate is really laudable. The gloomy rainy night, with its lonely surroundings, appears to be a living backdrop for committing dark deeds. Hiralal, with his unperturbed but indomitable nature emerges as a beautifully chiselled statuesque figure. Another story based on the theme of illicit love is 'Binodini's atmakatha' (Binodini's autobiography). Here also, as in the story 'Hiralal', the author ordains punishment on the heroine for her sinful acts. Binodini had a secret amorous relation with Sachin, during her pre-marriage days. She could not love her husband. She dreamt only of being united with Sachin. One day it so happened that she met Sachin. She resolved forthwith not to go back to her husband. She started living happily with Sachin as if they were husband and wife. But with the sudden death of Sachin, the curtain was rung down upon a 'delightful' drama. Binodini's fortune was completely reversed. Gradually she was forced to step downwards and was ultimately relegated to the most ignoble and pitiable position of a prostitute.

Prabhatkumar achieved distinction in delineating the romantic shades of love in his stories. Love in his stories is not by and large impetuous or turbulent. It is, to a great extent, sweet and suave. The characters involved do not usually violate the conventional ethical norms of the society. Within the delimited area of traditional morality, their love blossoms, unfolds its multi-coloured, many-splendoured petals. But at times, the lovers' encounter with the knotty problems of moral prejudice throw

their relation into utter confusion. Sometimes the hero rises above the narrow bounds of morality and exalts his love, but sometimes he fails. He becomes completely overcome by the accepted dicta of merciless morality. Prabhatkumar, with his heart, full of kindness for humanity, and with profound sympathy for human failings and foibles, mockingly insinuates at the heartless behaviour of the erring hero.

The very title of the story 'Sachcharitra' (The virtuous man) suggests the author's ridiculing attitude towards the extremely moralist stance of the hero. Under the constraints of financial hardship, Suren was compelled to agree to accept the offer of private tutorship of Nalini, the daughter of an actress in Calcutta. In course of time, Suren is enamoured of Nalini and starts thinking how to rescue her from the polluted environment. He was firmly determined to perform this noble act. But all on a sudden, one day Nalini's mother dispenses with his job after paying off all his dues. The initial shock being over, Suren's stream of thoughts about Nalini began to flow in diametrically opposite direction. He thought that it was not real love, but mere infatuation. He felt as if he had been saved from a tremendous peril. But Nalini really loved Suren. She earnestly requested him to take away her from her filthy surroundings. But Suren did not respond at all. He left Calcutta at once and fled away to his country-house. The author seeks to suggest satirically that Suren was a coward. His cowardice was evident in his inability to accept and honour love in preference to moral prejudices.

After a long lapse of more than twenty years, Prabhatkumar wrote another story named 'Alaka' (The name of a young girl, published in 1922) based on almost the same theme. But the conclusion of this story shows the qualitative change in respect of moral prejudices that the society has undergone after two decades.

In this story, financially hard-pressed, Binod receives money in advance as the private tutor of Alaka, the daughter of a retired

Deputy Magistrate. Subsequently, Binod and Alaka are deeply attached to each other. When the proposal for their wedding comes from Alaka's mother, Binod feels overwhelmed with inexplicable joy. But the moment he comes to learn that Alaka's mother is not the legal wife of the 'Deputy', Binod readily refuses to marry Alaka. But still, he cannot wipe away the sweet memory of his relations with Alaka. Why should he deny his relations with that innocent girl because of her parents' fault? However, towards the close the real episode of Alaka's parents comes out and the story ends with a delightful note. Though Prabhatkumar's formula of wish-fulfilment has also been adopted here, yet the triumph of love over narrow moral prejudices portrayed through the brief but precise psychological process operating in the hero's mind testifies to the author's liberal approach to human relations.

The characters involved in love-relations in Prabhatkumar were not always Bengalees. In his 'Bilati' stories, included in the *Deshi o bilati* collection, we find that mostly the heroines are British women, whereas the heroes hail from Bengal. The backdrop of those stories is England. But there are some stories where, against an Indian milieu, a romantic love story is woven with its heroine belonging either to non-Bengalee or non-Hindu community. In the story 'Railey collision' (The collision between two trains), Atalbehari, a Bengalee youth comes in close contact with Saraswati, a young woman of Gujrat in the midst of a terrible train-accident. Even when they think that their death is also imminent, they cannot help feeling the romantic sensations of love for each other. Despite our reservation regarding credibility of the co-existence of love and apprehension of death as alinedated in this story, we cannot but appreciate the author's choice of a non-Bengalee girl as the heroine of his tale. This attitude was somewhat rare in the then Bengali literature.

Niranjan, the hero of the story 'Dora', is Hindu by birth. He loves and is willing to marry a Christian nurse named Dora. However, the story takes an unexpected turn when Niranjan is informed that Dora is the illegal child of his father. Later, he

accepts his 'sister' with deep affection and arranges her marriage with a suitable bridegroom. This story also shows the author's magnanimity in respect of religion. To him, religious sectarianism was no hindrance in promoting human relations.

A few more stories bear distinct evidence of the broad-mindedness of the author as regards religion vis-a-vis humanism. He always placed humanism above religious bigotry and obduracy. Prabhatkumar lived in an age of religious movements. Brahmoism had made a strong impact on the minds of the young generation. These youths with their emotional excess in respect of Brahmoism could not even accept her marriage with a Hindu girl as a proper wedlock. In 'Bou churi' (stealing one's own wife) the author depicts this problem with a touch of mild satire. Anathsharan could not accept Mandakini as his wife because he himself had not selected her. Anath had an aversion towards negotiated marriage and Hinduism as well. He had developed a strong attachment for Brahmoism. He regarded his wife as his sister. He decided that both of them would be initiated into Brahmoism and then would be divorced from each other. After that both of them would be at liberty to choose their new partners in life. Anathsharan started translating his plan into action and surreptitiously 'eloped' with his wife. But ultimately all problems were easily resolved and Anath realised his erroneous conception about marriage and religion. Anathsharan and Mandakini found themselves a happy couple. It was Mandakini's love and devotion to her husband that played a vital role in rectifying the 'false' notions of the hero. Prabhatkumar once again seems to strike the note of triumph of human values over anything else.

In 'Pratyabartan' (The return) Ramnidhi was driven out of a mess-building by his classmates staying there with him, only because Ramnidhi was the son of a washerman. This inhuman ill-treatment of the upper-caste Hindu youths created sharp adverse reaction in Ramnidhi's mind. Out of severe mental pain and anguish, he preferred conversion to Christianity. He hoped that Christianity would be more liberal than Hinduism.

But when she became a Christian, he found to his utter disappointment and anguish, that Christians were divided into two categories – European and Native, and that European Christians looked down upon Native ones. Among other stories dealing with the theme of inter-relation between religion and humanism, 'Khokar kanda' (The affairs of the boy), 'Kanaier kirti' (The performance of Kanai) deserve mention.

Since fiction-writers have, by and large, an innate proneness towards realism, they cannot remain totally unaware of his contemporary socio-political backdrop. Prabhatkumar also was not unconcerned about the political upsurge following the Swadeshi movement prevalent in the earlier decades of this century. But he did not write the 'political stories' in the true sense of term. He chose only a few aspects of that movement. Somewhere it is merely the background, and in some stories the author has portrayed the characters of a number of hypocrites or opportunist persons, who were always after fishing in troubled waters. The background of 'Ukiler buddhi' (The wiles of a pleader) was Swadeshi movement. Subodhchandra had been practising as a pleader for four years, but he did not seem to be getting on well at all. He left no stone unturned to earn a moderate livelihood and had tried utmost for getting a job. But it was of no avail. In the midst of this pervasive gloom and darkness, one of his friends told him that Mr. Fuller, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, was arriving in the town. He also advised Subodh to entertain Mr. Fuller by according him a warm reception. Jagat, his friend, anticipated that this would certainly bring a covetable reward for Subodh in the shape of a comfortable berth under the Government. Because wherever the Lieutenant Governor went, nobody gave him a welcome out of hatred for the British Government.

With a view to solving his acute problem of financial hardship, Subodh felt no qualms of conscience in preparing for the entertainment of Mr. Fuller. But his friend Jagat told him that he would be called a traitor to his country if he welcomed Mr. Fuller

merely out of motives of self-interest. He told Subodh that it would not be proper to act in an unpatriotic manner when the whole country was determined not to welcome the Lieutenant Governor. But Subodh would not flinch back from his strong resolve.

Subodh said, 'Jagat you are talking like a school boy. Here I am rotting away for four years at Dinajshahi, selling my wife's jewels to buy my bread ; have the 'political leaders' ever enquired of me, whether there was anything in my house for tomorrow's dinner ? ... If I get an opportunity of doing something for myself, why shouldn't I ? If I can obtain a Government pleadership by humouring this new Assam government a little, where is the harm ? One gets tired of going about in torn clothes and tattered shoes and being insulted at every turn of the roads by one's creditors.

(Vide, *The Modern Review*, June 1909)

This desperate attempt of Subodh for justifying his proposed unpatriotic plan of action shows the pathetic aspect of his poverty-stricken life. Prabhatkumar has not supported by any means the 'traitor'-like behaviour of the pleader, but it is also evident that the heart of this humanist author is full of sympathy for this wretched fellow.

With the ulterior motive of realising his own interest, the wily pleader resorted to a lot of tricky devices for entertaining Mr. Fuller to his full satisfaction. As a natural consequence, Subodh had to undergo an extreme insult and disgrace for this shameful act. But when he came to know after all these hazards that he might be offered a job in the Police Service, the pleader was not at all happy.

Subodh replied with vehemence, 'What, become a policeman and turn a real traitor to the country ? These days during which I have only posed as a traitor, have been too much for me, I tell you (Jagat). By becoming a Deputy Superintendent of police my duty in this province will frequently be to go and

hurl regulation lathis at the heads of poor archins who have shouted *Bande Mataram*, to hunt down boys who in their youthful zeal have thrown half a seer of liverpool salt. No, thank you, not the Police Service for me. I would much rather go on starving at the bar.'

These somewhat compunctious utterances of the 'traitor' reveal the ambivalence of his character. The author intends to suggest the pleader's mental conflict between his helplessness in the midst of dire poverty and his conscientious awareness about his motherland. However, at last he had been lucky enough to be appointed as an eighth grade Deputy Magistrate.

In another story on the Swadeshi Movement, 'Hate hate phal' (Swift retribution), the author gives a graphic description of the cruel and inhuman treatment of some of the 'loyal' government servants under the British regime. Though Haragobinda, a physician, was a government servant, he was a genuine patriot at heart. He also believed in the basic moral values of life. On the other hand, Badanchandra, a 'loyal' police-inspector was up to all sorts of corrupt practices. Once this Inspector only for realising his own petty interests requested Haragobinda to act as a false witness in a lawsuit involving an Englishman. Being enraged with the inspector for his evil motives Haragobinda insulted him outright. Insulted and infuriated Badanchandra resolved to take revenge upon Haragobinda. He thought that he would apprehend two sons of Haragobinda though there was no specific charge against them. Moreover, he designed to involve Haragobinda in a number of false litigations, such as purchasing stolen articles from the burglars, accepting bribes etc. The author delineates this despicable character of a police officer with a sense of stark realism. These brazen-faced police officers had no concern for ethical values or qualms of conscience. These self-seeking persons were upto anything merely for a handful of coins. With the evil motive of harassing and persecuting that innocent doctor, Badan raided his house. But while searching a room, the alcohol-addict police officer mistook a bottle of medicine for a tumblerful of

alcohol and drank the liquid substance. He immediately fell seriously ill. And at last, it was that insulted doctor, who brought the dying police officer back to life. The story boldly reflects the author's satiric attitude towards the moral depravity of the police officers during the Swadeshi movement-period.

As a short story writer Prabhatkumar's artistic dexterity was of a very high order. Though it is true that his stories were chiefly rather tale-oriented than psychological or idea-based, still it must be admitted that his contemporaneous readers were fully engrossed by his inimitably charming style of narrating the story. Prabhatkumar's stories were usually marked with an almost perfect arrangement of beginning, middle and end. They were delineated in a very easy and facile manner, with inevitable dramatic crisis and climax well-placed. Besides these, his remarkable stories had the exclusive quality of 'singleness of effect' and 'pointing finger'-type suggestiveness. He was never given over to effusiveness or sentimental excess. He was rather possessed of a strong sense of proportion and propriety. The tears and smiles, the pleasures and pains of life were equitably spread over his stories. In the fabric of fiction reflecting life, which he had woven with sincerity and adroitness, was interspersed with variegated colours and shades of human existence. For those qualities, Prabhatkumar became popular with the Bengali readers of his own times.

Decades have rolled on since the passing away of Prabhatkumar, an eminent and esteemed litterateur of Bengal. His fame and popularity have faded inevitably with the passage of time, especially after the appearance of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay on the literary firmament of Bengal. But still, we feel that Prabhatkumar will never become an altogether forgotten name. He will be ever remembered for his stories, in which are treasured some fundamental values of a bygone age—an age at which the readers of the future generations will look with a longing lingering nostalgia.

Novels

Prabhatkumar is widely acclaimed even today as one of the leading short story writers of Bengali literature. But as a novelist, his contribution is not considered to be so remarkable. In fact Prabhatkumar's novels are, by and large, episodic. In most of his novels, there are a few sub-plots thinly interlinked with one another. Some of these sub-plots are, indeed, almost self-contained stories. Prabhatkumar achieved success as a short story writer because he had mastered the skill of creating a singleness of impression through a compact art-form. But in his novels, the multi-dimensional aspects of life are not reflected through the medium of a well-arranged and well-knit plot, as a result of which they appear to be somewhat loose and disorganised.

But still it must be admitted that some of his novels were very much popular with the contemporary reading public of Bengal. The romantic flavour in his story-element, the facile and impressive style of his presentation, dramatic situations – these were some of the attractive features of his novels. We have already mentioned that Prabhatkumar was a zealous admirer of Rabindranath. But it can never be denied that the novels of Bankimchandra left a powerful impact in shaping the fictional personality of Prabhatkumar. The imprints of this impact are quite evident in Prabhatkumar's proneness towards romance and in his somewhat traditional value-sense about social and ethical problems.

Ramasundari

It may be categorically stated that Prabhatkumar sought to imbibe a few facets of Bankimchandra's view point concerning life. But while Bankimchandra authored a good number of novels

with a historical setting, Prabhatkumar as a novelist, restricted himself only to social milieu. He wrote thirteen novels and also an incomplete one. His first novel was *Ramasundari*. It was published in 1908. *Ramasundari*, the wild-natured unruly girl with a love for sylvan background, reminds us of the heroine of Bankimchandra's *Kapalkundala*. Though Rama had a touch of masculinity in her nature and demeanour, still she had not completely lost her innate feminine grace and tenderness. One of the attractive features of this novel lies in the portrayal of this uncommon young girl with both masculine and feminine trends in her nature and life-style. But the girl eventually falls in love with Nabagopal, the only son of a feudal lord. Nabagopal, a young educated man with a strong will and determination, had to face a stiff resistance from his father in regard to his marrying *Ramasundari*. Later on, the young hero, firm in his resolve, was wedded to her lady-love even without his father's consent.

Through the delineation of the hostility between the father and the son, the author seeks to portray the struggle between the age-old conservative elements and the modern progressive outlook of the young generation of our society. The realistic depiction of this generation-gap adds a significant dimension to this otherwise romantic novel.

The latter portion of the novel recounts the post-marriage life of *Ramasundari* and Nabagopal. They were not initially accepted by the hero's father. But in the face of this unfortunate opposition from his father, the resolute Nabagopal was not subdued. Since he had no permanent residence, he travelled widely with his wife, Rama. The author provides a delightful description of their romantic experiences at Kashmir. This part of the novel is, indeed, somewhat loosely connected with the mainstream of the story. But still it should be admitted that with this graphic description of Kashmir, Prabhatkumar has certainly broadened the geographical boundary of the Bengali social novel. Finally the story ends with a happy note when the estranged father and the son (along with his wife) are reconciled.

Nabin sannyasi

Nabin sannyasi (The young ascetic), the second novel, was published in 1912. The theme of the novel indicates that the author had an apathy towards asceticism. Rather he had an adoration for an ideal conjugal and domestic life. In this novel he satirizes the futile exercise of a religious-minded educated youth for accepting celibacy and being initiated into asceticism. The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by Hindu revival and gradually a craving for asceticism mounted among the young people, partially under the influence of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda. But most of the young men were not serious about it. With them, it was nothing more than a passing spell of excitement. Mohit, the hero, was one among those who were caught under this spell.

But this phase of yearning for asceticism bereft of any love or longing for normal ways and joys of life was not very brief in the hero's life. He had to undergo manifold experiences before he could find out the path which would lead him to the fulfilment of his true self. When Mohit came out of his family leaving behind all beckoning 'temptations' of domestic comforts and pleasures, he subsequently came in contact with a group of charlatans pretending to be ascetics. Mohit was disillusioned regarding his spiritual ideals.

Before Mohit left home, he had been associated with a young girl named Chini. Mohit could not realise consciously that he had taken a fancy to that girl. But one day, when he came to know that the girl had fallen ill, Mohit was deeply perturbed and ardently prayed to God for her quick recovery. During the days when the girl was lying ill, Mohit's heart was full, to the utmost measure, with a sense of deep attachment towards that girl. He could not by any means whatsoever drive away his thought concerning Chini, that young girl.

Mohit became quite perplexed and confused when he was in the midst of a number of hypocrite ascetics. He could not

determine what to do. At this crucial juncture, he perchance met an unfortunate widower who still cherished in the deepest corner of his heart the sad memory of his departed wife.

This man earnestly prayed to God for the salvation of his wife's soul. This touching experience of sacred love made a profound impression upon Mohit's vacillating mind. He came to realise that God manifested Himself through selfless love. He was also the source of perennial joy. Now he could understand that he made only a futile exercise by choosing the path of joyless and loveless asceticism. At this stage of introspection and self-analysis, Mohit ultimately decided to change his ways of life. He gave up his strong vow of celibacy and asceticism and felt an earnest desire for being united with his lady-love, Chini. Finally he returned home.

In this novel, the author Prabhatkumar seems to be bent upon establishing a theory – the theory of the triumph of love and pulsating life-force over dry and dismal asceticism. Apart from this theorisation, a sensitive reader can visualise the lively image of Prabhatkumar as a profound lover of life.

The most attractive character of this novel is Gadai Pal – a steward of Gopikanta, the elder brother of Mohit. This villain-type shrewd man is capable of all kinds of dark deeds, especially chicanery, forgery etc. This character with his evil designs and machinations, nefarious activities and extreme hypocrisy has emerged as the most dominating and lively person of the novel. A little touch of comic element has made this character all the more attractive to the readers.

Ratnadeep

Ratnadeep (The jewelled lamp) has been accepted by the readers as the best novel of Prabhatkumar. The plot-structures of the two preceding novels namely, *Ramasundari* and *Nabin-sannyasi* were rather loose and disorderly. But the author of *Ratnadeep* appears to be more mature, and the plot of this novel is, by and large, well-knit.

Rakhal Bhattacharya, the hero of this novel, is the assistant station master of a very small railway station. His monthly salary was a meagre amount of rupees twenty-five. But quite unfortunately he lost this job also. He was extremely disappointed and demoralised. He was a married man, but his wife had left him. He was quite unaware of her whereabouts. Under these adverse circumstances, Rakhal was totally perplexed as regards his future course of activity. He was quite at a loss as to determine what to do. But at this crucial juncture of his dismal life, suddenly came an entirely unexpected opportunity – just like a windfall for him. On the last night of railway-service, he was informed that the dead body of an unidentified ascetic was found in an inter-class railway compartment, and it was kept in the warehouse of the station.

It was a dark rainy night, quite suitable for dark deeds. Rakhal, in his utterly miserable plight, thought of stealing money, if there be anything from the dead person's purse. His conscience struggled hard with his greedy unethical self. But finally he decided to steal money. He surreptitiously reached the godown and took away the desired money bag. He also found, along with the money bag, a manuscript containing the autobiography of the deceased ascetic. Rakhal read the manuscript and came to know that the ascetic was the owner of a big landed property. He was going to his native village, Basulipara, where lived his young wife. Subsequently when Rakhal came to know that he bore an unbelievably perfect resemblance regarding physical appearance to that dead ascetic, he made an evil design of impersonating the ascetic and going to Basulipara. The irresistible greed for wealth and lust for a beautiful young 'wife' had completely turned his head. Of course, before taking this fateful decision, Rakhal had to undergo a restless state of mental conflict. However he overcame this phase of indecision and was ready for taking the most dangerous risk in his life. He made all possible preparatory arrangements before he reached Basulipara, the native village of Bhabendra, the dead ascetic.

The reader finds the story most interesting and intriguing after

Rakhal's arrival at Basulipara in the guise of Bhabendra. He almost perfectly plays his role as Bhabendra, the wealthy owner of a large property. But when the moment comes for union with his young 'wife', Rakhal cannot help feeling the prick of conscience. He shrinks, and defers the physical union with 'Baurani', the young wife, for six months on the pretext of practising ascetical austerities.

Readers of modern times may consider this twist in the course of events in the novel as an evidence of the conservative outlook of the author. Because here the author seems to be a moralist, who cannot give indulgence to his hero or heroine for performing any 'immoral' act. Though this assumption may not be unreasonable, it must be admitted that this hesitation of Rakhal in that particular situation, is not quite unnatural. Rather this diffidence on the part of Rakhal is more or less psychologically sound.

Hereafter, Rakhal gradually undergoes a basic change in his attitude towards 'Baurani'. His crude physical desire slowly turns into a sense of genuine love. Rakhal wrongly believed that Bourani also loved him. But he was not aware of the feelings of Baurani's innermost heart. It was her ascetic husband and not Rakhal whom 'Baurani' loved. The story ends with an inevitably tragic note when Rakhal revealed his mind and let 'Baurani' know about his deep attachment for her. It was a terrible shock for that unfortunate lady, and she found no other way for doing penance for her 'sin', except committing suicide. And thus the curtain was rung down upon the life of an innocent young lady for no fault of hers. On the other hand, Rakhal was reunited with her real wife at the end of the story.

The remarkable aspect of *Ratnadeep* in respect of the author's attitude towards life is that it is the meeting point of tradition and modernity. Here we find the author's strong inclination for traditional moral values and at the same time, his modernist proclivity towards depicting the inner conflict between normal human emotions and compelling conscience. Apart from

all these critical analyses, *Ratnadeep* stands out, even today, as one of the remarkable novels of Bengali literature for its quality of enthralling story-telling. The story comprising elements of crime, conspiracy, impersonation as well as conflicting emotions of heart irresistibly attracts the attention of the story-loving readers. This novel was translated into several Indian languages. Pandit Janardan Jha translated it into Hindi.

The next novel written by Prabhatkumar was *Jibaner mulya* (The price of life). This is a story of an aged Brahmin named Girish, who had gone almost mad after his third marriage with a young girl. The setting of the story is rural. Girish was a richman who had amassed much wealth from usury. After the death of his second wife, he decided not to marry again because he knew that his children would not be properly attended to by his new wife. But still he could not restrain his temptation when he suddenly saw one morning a fourteen-year girl named Prabha. That very night the old man dreamt a curious dream. He dreamt that it was none but his first wife who had been born again as Prabhabati. And in his dream Girish also felt that she had been earnestly requesting her husband to marry Prabhabati. This dream, which was in reality nothing but a sort of wish-fulfilment for that old man, entirely changed the course of events. Girish interpreted the dreams as something miraculous and thus obtained a strong justification for marrying Prabhabati. The village-priest, by endorsing his interpretation of the dream also added fuel to his burning desire.

On the other hand, Satish, a wily sycophant, painted in his self-seeking design a false imaginary picture of Prabha's deep attraction for Girish. But it is needless to say that the real story was just the opposite. Prabhati developed a strong aversion for that old fellow.

The chief attraction of this novel was in the ridiculous nature of the oldman's gradual escalation of craze for marrying a teenager. The author's skill in creating a number of comical situations relating to various incongruities in this stage of old man's life has

been quite commendable. But the latter part of the story is rather weak. It is somewhat melodramatic ending with a pathetic note. Prabhabati is married to Rajkumar. The old Brahmin, out of terrible anger and indignation, curses Prabha and her family. The course of events of the penultimate phase of the novel now takes a new and to a large extent, unnatural turn. Prabha's husband, her parents and brother – all these four persons die one after another. The author, of course, has not attributed these deaths to the curse of disgruntled Girish. Most probably, as the author intends to suggest, these were nothing but mere coincidence. However, Prabhabati becomes miserably helpless and is forced to lead an extremely hard life of financial stringency. As days pass by, Girish starts repenting for all his past deeds. He even offers financial help to that wretched girl. But since Prabha considered him as the root cause of her misfortune, she preferred extreme poverty to accepting money from him. She refused outright his offer out of strong contempt for that old man. The price of life can never be paid in terms of money. Prabhabati, that wretched girl, had lost all faith in the values of life. That loss was irreparable.

Prabhatkumar could have written an amusingly comical story out of the theme of an old man's craze for third marriage. There have been written a number of stories and farcical plays on this theme. Those were all comical. But Prabhatkumar, who was deft in handling funny themes, did not follow the footsteps of his predecessors. He preferred to expose the inhuman nature of his contemporary rural society by striking a pathetic note. The disaster caused to an innocent village-girl for no fault of hers perturbed the kindhearted author.

It is not possibly irrelevant to note here that the inspiration for writing this novel stemmed out of a real incident, which the author had somehow come to know.

Sindur kauta

The story of *Sindoor kauta* (The vermilion-box) has some

traits of semblance to Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Bishabriksha* (The poison-tree). In this novel also, the happiness of the ideal conjugal life of Vijay and Bakurani is almost completely jeopardised by the inauspicious intrusion of Sushi, a Bengalee Christian girl into their life. Sushi is not a virgin-woman, nor a widow like Kundanandini of *Bishabriksha*. Her husband is Paul. But as Sushi feels herself ill-treated by Paul, she comes closer to Vijay, whose heart is full of sympathy for her. But this sense of pity subsequently turns into an irresistible amorous relation. Thus begins a phase of acute conjugal problems. The relation between Bijay and Bakurani becomes extremely strained. The author's 'sympathetic' attitude towards the illicit love between Vijay and Sushi (both of them being married), evinces Prabhatkumar's somewhat modernist temperament. However, the novelist tries to create a complicated tangle, the basis of which is 'eternal triangle'. But it is perhaps quite disappointing for the sensitive reader, when he finds that the author resolves the crisis by upholding the ideals of 'vermilion-box', i.e. the conservative values of an extremely devoted wife. Despite her declaration that she is a woman of the twentieth century, Bakurani finally does not hesitate to accept Sushi as another wife of her husband. From a realist's point of view, the novel has many shortcomings. The author has not properly analysed the psychological reasons behind Vijay's frenzied attraction for Sushi, nor has he unfolded the conflicting aspects of her inner self. But still, the noble self-sacrifice of Bakurani and her deep esteem for old traditional values of our society had a wide-ranging appeal for a large section of contemporary Bengali readers.

Moner Manush

The problem of the novel *Moner manush* (Person after one's own heart) stems out of social and economic disparity between the rich and the poor, between the rural way of life and the ultra-modern urbanity. Kunjalal and Indubala felt in their sentimental adolescent age that they had loved each other deeply. This type of 'calf-love' surcharged with emotional excess had gradually

faded away in course of time. Indubala was the daughter of a rich physician with a westernised life-style, whereas Kunjalal was merely an ordinary 'native doctor'.

Eventually their marriage did not take place because of their diametrically opposite social and economic status. There is an underlying mild satiric tone in the novel. The author likes to have an oblique view of the young people indulging in frenzied imagination and too much sentimentalism without having any concern with the realities of life. And herein lies the chief interest of the novel.

Arati

The theme of the novel *Arati* (The name of the heroine) is in tune with those of *Jibaner mulya* (The price of life) and *Sindoor kauta* (The vermilion-box). In *Arati*, like two above-noted novels, the heroine is the symbol of traditional devotion of a Hindu woman to her husband. Binod, Arati's husband, is prone to all sorts evil deeds. He has left his innocent wife for living with a prostitute. Binod has never loved Arati. But, one day, Binod is stabbed and is brought to his wife, Arati. Arati forgets all the past misdeeds and inhuman behaviour of her husband and unhesitatingly tries her utmost for the speedy recovery of Binod. In the convalescent period, Binod gradually realises his error and repents for his ill-treatment to his innocent wife. The story ends with the happy reunion of Binod and Arati. As the characters are devoid of any inner conflict or personal (not social) moral awareness, they do not appear to be so much living. Prabhatkumar portrays her heroine with a conventionally ideal model of a Hindu wife in a feudal society. She is bereft of any individuality of her own, who ungrudgingly accepts her lascivious husband. Prabhatkumar, it has been told time and again, had a sense of reverence for the past, for the age-old values of our society. It is needless to say that this attitude had endeared the author to a large section of his readers.

One of the chief characteristics of Prabhatkumar's novels is

that he did not always restrict the background only to Bengal. He extended it to other parts of India. As for example, we find the background of Kashmir in his first novel *Ramasundari*, Champaran district of Bihar in *Nabin sannyasi*, Jubbulpur in *Sindoor kauta*. In the novel *Satyabala* (the name of heroine), the background includes Tibbet, and some portions of the story of *Sukher milan* (The happy union) have been enacted in Burma. In this context, we may remember the outlandish backdrop of Europe in some of his short stories. The novel *Satyabala* marks no significant deviation from the author's general attitude to life or society. Here also the heroine represents the ideals of self-denying love who spends the rest of her life, cherishing with profound devotion, the memory of her lover. But the author quite ironically suggests that the hero of the novel, Kisori, did not quite deserve that deep devotion of Satyabala. Kisori, the lover, most unscrupulously leaves Satyabala behind being panic-stricken with the threat of police. After his arrival at Tibbet, he develops an intimate relation with Nina, a Tibetan girl, who has inherited a large property from her father. Kisori marries the Tibetan girl, not out of any genuine love for her, but chiefly for her wealth.

After several years, when he is dying, Kisori remembers Satyabala for once again and entreats his wife to go to Calcutta and meet Satyabala. In the concluding part of the novel, we find the hapless widow of Kisori meeting the ill-fated Satyabala.

Sukher milan

In the novel, *Sukher milan* (The happy union) the sub-plot is more attractive than the main plot, narrating the happy marriage of Santi and Usha. In a number of stories and novels, Prabhatkumar had skilfully portrayed the lives and activities of criminals and sinners. But never before this novel (*Sukher milan*) did he depict the horrifying consequence of sinful acts. Haridas Banerjee was disinherited by his father because he had married a Christian girl. Haridas alias Harry left this country and went to Burma where he amassed huge amount of money. But as ill luck would have it, his wife died when they were living in Mirzapur.

The bereaved widower had no inclination towards a second marriage. But when he met perchance Bela alias Belinda, he had to change his earlier decision. Bela was irresistably allured by the vast property of Harry Banerjee. She married Harry. But she had developed a clandestine illicit relation with James Khosla before her marriage. So very soon, the marriage of Bela and Harry was legally dissolved. Bela married James and started living with him. Harry feels himself utterly duped and resolves to take terrible revenge. This story ends with fatal punishment of Bela along with James for her heinous crime of infidelity.

Satir pati

Satir pati (The husband of a chaste woman) was published in 1928. During this decade 'ultra-modern' young Kalloleans (A group of writers attached to the periodical *Kallol*) had created a stir by trying their best to demolish the age-old ethical values of our society and to create in our mind an entirely unconventional, bohemian and amoral (if not always immoral) attitude to life. If we assess the said novel of Prabhatkumar in this context, we shall be extremely bewildered. What a contrast between two attitudes to life and society ! In the penultimate days of the third decade of the twentieth century, the heroine of *Satir pati* retains her deep devotion to her libertine husband intact and ultimately agrees to live with him again without uttering almost a single word of protest.

Hiralal, a poor village-youth, comes to Calcutta in search of a job, but eventually gets involved with Revati, the most infatuating actress of the city. Hiralal falls a prey to the bewitching wiles of Revati. But even when this heart-rending news reaches Surabala, the wife of Hiralal, she feels excruciating pain, but her devotion to her husband is not impaired at all. She weeps silently and waits with immense patience for the return of the 'prodigal'. Finally Revati, the actress, unexpectedly changes her mind, and out of a sense of selfless love and magnanimity releases Hiralal from her clutches and sends him to his wife. The portrayal of this genuine love in the innermost recess of a countess's heart evinces the

author's modernistic progressive outlook. But on the otherhand, his mind seems to be more conservative than that of Bankimchandra. In *Krishnakanter will* (The will of Krishnakanta) Bhramar, the chaste wife of Gobindalal, could never forgive her erring husband for his debauchery. But in *Satir pati*, Surabala upholds the ideals of conjugal life by readily accepting her husband with pristine love and devotion. In fact, Prabhatkumar is an artist who has an ingrained inclination towards conventional value-based ways of life. He stares at that gradually disappearing landscape with a longing-lingering look even in the midst of radically changing phases of values of life.

Pratima

In the novelette *Pratima* (The name of the heroine) the author depicts the tale of a modern educated young girl who finds herself in a sorry plight when her parents die. Bhairab Chakravarty, one of her distinct relatives, gives her shelter. Subsequently, Pratima's marriage is settled with the youngest son of Bhairab who resides abroad. It is scheduled to be held when the groom Surendra will come back. But the problem mounts when Khagendra, the elder brother of Surendra, consistently insists on marrying Pratima. Khagendra a widower, is given over to all sorts of immoral activities. Pratima with her strong resolute personality is bent upon marrying Surendra, whom she has accepted for ever as her husband. Khagendra with all his evil manoeuvres tries to entrap Pratima, but ultimately fails. Pratima with her presence of mind and determination comes out of the ordeal unscathed. Khagendra with an experience of utter discomfiture flies to Burma. The story ends with a happy note. The only remarkable aspect of this otherwise insignificant piece of writing is the portrayal of the strong individuality of an educated young girl of the modern age. The novels *Satir pati* and *Pratima* were published in the same year, 1928. But it is significant to note here that the impressions which the heroines (Surabala and Pratima) of the two novels create upon the reader's mind are almost diametrically opposite. The former one is merely a part of the old conservative social

machinery. She has no separate individual entity of her own. But Pratima, as we have already pointed out, is strongly individualistic and modern.

Nabadurga

Prabhatkumar's last complete novel *Nabadurga* (1930) was based on the moral turpitude and depravity of the hypocrite religious abbots. The ethical problems and the conflict between good and evil formed the basis of a number of novels of Prabhatkumar. Among those novels, *Ratnadeep* was the best. *Nabadurga* also deals with the sinful lust of Ambikapuri, the 'mohunt' of Kedareshwar, for a young girl named Nabadurga. This moral problem involving a hypocrite abbot was not merely a figment of imagination. In fact this was essentially a social problem which may be traced back to the Middle ages. Even in the nineteenth-century Bengal, the religious lords exerted an assertive control over the people. They could, if they desired, go to any length of immoral activities. Prabhatkumar has convincingly portrayed the dark and detestable aspects of Ambikapuri's character. The story of this novel is not merely a sensational fiction. It is, in some respect, a documentation of social evils. The concluding part of the novel has been designed according to the author's inclination towards wish-fulfilment formula. The evil design and desperate attempts of the villain-type hypocrite abbot are ultimately foiled. Nabadurga comes out unmolested from the clutches of Ambikapuri. She is happily married with Adharchandra, who had been partially instrumental in repulsing the conspiracies of the 'Mohunt'. *Nabadurga* may not be regarded as a well-written novel from the view-point of art, but it is undoubtedly characterised by a sense of social commitment of the author.

Appreciation

A century has passed since Prabhatkumar made his debut in Bengali literature. He published two short poems in 1890 in the journal *Balak O Bharati*. Now we presume that it will not be possibly quite irrelevant to try to reassess Prabhatkumar from his long-range perspective. It is true that in the minds of the reading public of Bengal today, the memory of Prabhatkumar has become somewhat hazy and indistinct. Dust of 'time long past' has blurred his name which was once written in letters of shining gold in the hearts of his countless contemporary admirer.

Now at the fag-end of this century we may wonder as to how and for what precise reasons he had attained the crest of popularity as a fictionist.* Though Rabindranath Tagore was the pioneer author in the field of Bengali short-stories, and Prabhatkumar appeared on the scene following at the heels of his predecessor, Prabhatkumar was undoubtedly more successful than Tagore in winning over the hearts of the short-story readers. The reason behind it was that the average readers were not capable or properly appreciating the psychological depth and subtle aesthetic qualities of Tagore's stories. Rather, on the contrary, they could have an easy access to the world of Prabhatkumar's stories, which were written mainly for the entertainment of the common readers with no special emphasis on the psychological or philosophical interpretation of life or revelation of the unfathomable mysteries of human existence. Rabindranath was still then an author for 'select readers'. But in Prabhatkumar's stories were reflected the familiar scenes and situations of the lives of the ordinary people—episodes of their

* See Appendix I

simple life. But it does not mean that Prabhatkumar's stories were devoid of any variety. Rather his stories were abounding in variety of events and characters. As in the one hand, his stories were woven around social, political and religious problems of his time, he chose materials from some interesting and intriguing news about cheating or persons 'lost, missing and found again', appearing on the contemporary daily newspapers.

The common readers were exceedingly delighted and entertained when they found that those sensational themes had been rendered into impressive story-forms. But it should be noted here that these stories were not always marked merely by a superficial entertainment value, but some of these tales had an abiding and deep human appeal.

Variety of backgrounds both Indian and foreign, rural and urban, added a significant dimension to the popular image of his fiction. A far-extending vista of life comprising multi-coloured aspects of the nature and behaviour of people residing in different places of India and abroad had made Prabhatkumar's stories all the more attractive to his readers.

From the view-point of a modern man, Prabhatkumar undoubtedly appears to be a conservative writer with a strong inclination towards some age-old socio-ethical values and ideals. It is certainly one of the principal reasons for the gradual decay of his popularity in modern times. He seems to be outdated today so far as his moral views are concerned.

In this context we may remember the glorious appearance of Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya in the domain of Bengali literature. This outstanding personality dominated the literary scene of Bengal when Prabhatkumar was still continuing his creative pursuits. But Saratchandra, with his progressive outlook about the relation between the individual and the society, his profound sympathy for the oppressed and even more precisely for the wretched and fallen women, alongwith his psychological analysis of human minds, won over the hearts of millions of Bengali

readers.

As Saratchandra, the champion of the progressive values of modern life, became more and more widely acclaimed, Prabhatkumar's popularity gradually dwindled away. But Saratchandra was essentially a novelist. The great edifice of his eminence as a litterateur stood mainly on the pillars of his novels. His popularity as short-story writer was not quite at par with Prabhatkumar's. Prabhatkumar enjoyed immense popularity as a short-story writer till the end of life. Though it is true that this popularity was partially due to his commendable craftsmanship, it should be kept in mind that his popularity may also be attributed to the fact that he was never an extremist in his socio-ethical views.

His conservatism was not an unmixed extreme attitude. It was restrained and tempered by a somewhat liberal humanistic approach to life. And as it has been already mentioned that it was this moderatist and, to some extent, impartial make-up of his mind which was, by and large, instrumental in bringing in far-extending popularity for him.

It is significant to observe here that the co-existence of conservatism and a sense of liberal humanism created no intricate problem in Prabhatkumar's mind. He accepted this ambivalence with his innate calm quietude and complacency. He gave a facile and suave expression of these apparently contradictory views of life by creating a mildly coloured chiaroscuro of simple pleasures and pains, hopes and disappointments with his usual gracious detachment.

Now it may be categorically stated at the conclusion that despite some limitations, Prabhatkumar had been widely accepted as a very popular story-writer in his life-time. But we find that even when more than half-a-century has elapsed since his death, he is not an altogether forgotten personality in Bengali literature. He is still remembered and revered as a unique fiction-writer. This is only due to the perennial human appeal

underlying his stories. Despite his conservative social and moral views, he was a profound humanist. His conservatism never impeded the flow of his genuine compassion for the distressed and love for all sections of people.

This unending stream of deep human feelings runs through his creative writings. Prabhatkumar will be remembered a long time for this genuine and intense love for humanity.

APPENDIX I

A note on the editions and translations of Prabhatkumar's writings

Prabhatkumar's popularity as a fictionist may be partially ascertained from the fact that several editions of some of his short-story collections and novels namely, *Nabakatha*, *Soroshi*, *Deshi o bilati*, *Ramasundari*, *Nabin sannyasi*, etc, were published during his life-time.

Moreover, his stories and novels were translated into different Indian languages. As for example, the collection of stories namely, '*Deshi o bilati*' was rendered into Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Tamil, etc. His several novels including *Ratnadeep*, *Nabin sannyasi*, *Jibaner mulya*, etc, were also translated into different Indian languages.

It may be added here that some stories of Prabhatkumar were translated into English also. An anthology of his stories, entitled *Stories of Bengali Life*, was published in 1912. Those stories were translated by Miriam S. Knight and Prabhatkumar himself. Besides this anthology, Sri Amiya Chakravarty, Sri Hiranmay Ghosal, Srimati Lila Ray and others translated a few more stories into English. In an anthology entitled *Ten Tales* published by Oxford University Press in 1931, was included the English rendering of Prabhatkumar's famous humorous story, 'Balaban jamata' (The muscular son-in-law).

APPENDIX II

Works of Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay**COLLECTIONS OF SHORT STORIES**

1. *Nabakatha* (A collection of new stories), 1899
2. *Sirashi* (A collection of sixteen stories), 1906
3. *Deshi o bilati* (stories relating to the lives of Indian and foreign people), 1909
4. *Galpanjali* (The offering of stories), 1913
5. *Galpa bithi* (The avenue of stories), 1916
6. *Patrapuspa* (Leaves and flowers), 1917
7. *Gahanar baksa o anyanya galpa* (The ornament box and other stories), 1921
8. *Hatash premik o anyanya galpa* (the disappointed lover and other stories), 1924
9. *Bilashini o anyanya galpa* (The luxurious woman and other stories), 1926
10. *Yubaker prem o anyanya galpa* (The love of a youngman and other stories), 1928
11. *Nutan bou o anyanya galpa* (The new bride and other stories), 1929
12. *Jamata babaji o anyanya galpa* (The son-in-law and other stories), 1913

NOVELS

1. *Ramasundari* (The name of the heroine), 1908
2. *Nabin sannyasi* (the young ascetic), 1912
3. *Ratnadeep* (The bejewelled lamp), 1915

4. *Jibaner mulya* (The price of life), 1917
5. *Sindoor kauta* (The vermilion box), 1919
6. *Moner manush* (The person after one's heart), 1922
7. *Arati* (The name of the heroine), 1924
8. *Satyabala* (The name of the heroine), 1925
9. *Sukher milan* (The happy union), 1927
10. *Satir pati* (The husband of a chaste woman), 1928
11. *Pratima* (The name of the heroine), 1930
12. *Garib swami* (The poor husband), 1930
13. *Nabadurga* (The name of the heroine), 1930

APPENDIX III

A. Books on Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay

1. *Prabhatkumar : Jiban O sahitya* by Dr. Shibesh kumar Chattopadhyay
2. *Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay O bangla sahitya* by Pranati Nath
3. *Sahitya sadhak charitmala* Vol. 54 by Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay
4. *Samagrik dristitey Prabhatkumar* by Bibhutibhusan Mukhopadhyay

B. Books containing deliberations on Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay

1. *Banga shahityey upanyaser dhara* by Srikumar Bandyopadhyay
2. *Bangla sahityer itihās (Vol.4)* by Sukumar Sen
3. *Bangla galpa bichitra* by Narayan Gangopadhyay
4. *Bangla sahitye hasyāras* by Ajit kumar Dutta
5. *Bangla chhottogalpa* by Sisir Kumar Das
6. *Bangla sahityer chhotogalpa O galpakar* by Bhudev Chaudhuri
7. *Bangla upanyaser kalantar* by Saroj Bandyopadhyay
8. *Kaler puttālika* by Arunkumar Mukhopadhyay
9. *Dui bishwayuddher madhyakalin bangla kathasahitya* by Gopikanath Roy Chowdhury
10. *Chhotogalper bichitra katha* by Sarojmohan Mitra

